Herbal Remedies Are Not for Children

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by Julie Mortimore, RD, Public Health Nutritionist
San Bernardino County Department of Public Health, Nutrition Program
(909) 387-6331; jmortimore@dph.sbcounty.gov

There is little reason to entrust the health and safety of children to the unregulated dietary supplement industry. Dietary supplement manufacturers are governed under the Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act of 1994 that allows products to be sold without prior Food and Drug Administration approval.

Herbal products can be contaminated with heavy metals (such as lead, mercury, arsenic, aluminum, or tin) or undeclared substances, such as caffeine, diazepam. In addition, misidentification of plant preparations has been linked to the ingestion of toxic agents.

Random testing of various supplements, such as those undertaken by Consumer Lab www.consumerlab.com, indicates that many dietary supplements do not carry the amount of active ingredients stated on the label. According to pharmacognosist Varro Tyler, herbal product consumers have less than a 50 percent chance of receiving a product that is accurately labeled.

Health claims for herbal products are often based flimsy evidence, if there is any valid scientific investigation at all. Where evidence does exist to substantiate the use of an herbal preparation, few products offer the substance shown to be effective in medical studies. Theses variants may not provide the same benefit demonstrated in clinical trials.

Susceptibility to poisoning can vary with age, gender, state of health, and concurrent use of other drugs. The unique physiology of children makes them more prone to adverse effects than adults. Herbal toxicity can occur cumulatively over time when a specific threshold is exceeded. Individual threshold for overdose is often related to body weight leaving children at greater risk of poisoning due to their smaller body mass. Giving herbal remedies to children subjects them to a system that cannot take their specific health care needs into account.

It is likely that harm due to dietary supplements is greatly under reported. According to a March 2000 report in the Washington Post, there is a disparity between the number of adverse events reported to the Food and Drug Administration's Special Monitoring System and the American Association of Poison Control Centers (AAPCC). From 1993 to 1998, the Food and Drug Administration accumulated 2, 621 adverse events with 184 deaths. In 1998 alone, the AAPCC received 6, 914 reports on supplements, and 64 percent of these reports were from children under six years of age.

In 1993, three unrelated children took Jin bu Huan (a Chinese herbal medicine used for treating pain) and had severe adverse health effects, one ending in fatality. Following an investigation the product' potential for toxicity was found to have resulted from a combination of factors:

1) Extreme potency of it's active ingredient L-THP
2) Misidentification of the plant from which the product was derived
3) False medical claims made in promotional material
4) General availability of the product
5) Lack of childproof packaging.

These factors pertain to many herbal products on the market today. Until action has been taken to safeguard the use of herbal remedies, administering them to infants or children cannot be considered responsible practice.

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